

HANDSELL
4835 Indiantown Road
Vienna vicinity
Dorchester County
Maryland

HABS MD-1319
MD-1319

PHOTOGRAPHS

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

ADDENDUM TO:
HANDSELL
4835 Indiantown Road
Vienna vicinity
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ADDENDUM TO HANDSELL

HABS No. MD-1319

Location: 4835 Indiantown Road, Vienna vicinity, Dorchester County, Maryland

Present Owner: Nanticoke Historic Preservation Alliance, Inc.

Occupant: Vacant

Present Use: The house is only periodically open for public tours during special events.

Significance: Handsell—a name derived from the original 1665 English land grant to Thomas Taylor—is a well-preserved example of the vernacular domestic architecture of the Chesapeake region. The house retains a high degree of integrity to the 1830s, although its front and side walls date from the eighteenth century, the remnants of a larger house. Handsell is located on the Nanticoke River and Chicone Creek north of Vienna and was constructed on a Native American Chicone village site where Taylor, an official interpreter for the Maryland colony, established a trading post. In 1769, Henry Steele, a member of an affluent and prominent colonial family, and his wife Ann acquired the property after the Chicone reservation was dissolved by the government. The couple likely constructed the original house prior to 1776 and it may have been destroyed as early as 1779 during British raids along the river.

Evidence suggests that another house was not built on the site until John Shehee purchased the property in 1837 from a grandson of the Steeles. Dendrochronology has established that timbers used in the construction of the present Handsell date from that same year. The building's story-and-a-half form is typical for Chesapeake houses of the period, yet its vernacular character is, in some ways, challenged by the seemingly incongruous presence of particularly fine brickwork on the front and side walls. Shehee's decision to use extant sections of the ruined eighteenth-century house's walls was almost certainly an economic one, but, in doing so, he also inadvertently preserved visual evidence of an older house having much grander architectural and social pretensions than the new. Handsell's combination of the Georgian remnants and more modest form and details, in addition to a high level of integrity in part stemming from a lack of modern utilities, are remarkable among Chesapeake dwellings.

Historian: Margaret W. Ingersoll, Nanticoke Historic Preservation Alliance, Inc.

PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: original house, ca. 1769; rebuilt in 1837.¹

¹ These date ranges are estimates based on many various sources including family history data, deeds, and census reports, and will be further discussed in this report. The dendrochronology study at Handsell occurred in

2. **Architect, builder:** There was no architect in the modern sense of the term. English-born Henry Steele and his American-born wife Ann Billings owned the property. Their family connections in Annapolis and the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and in Cumberland, England, the couple would have exposed them to high-style Georgian architecture. Any number of houses also could have served as models or sources, such as the Ogle House in Annapolis and Friendship Hall in East New Market, Maryland. A skilled builder would have worked with the Steeles to translate these ideas into a house based on the local availability of materials and labor, as well as construction methods common to the region. The second house on the site, constructed in 1837, has a common form that would have been familiar to any builder working in the Chesapeake region at the time.

3. **Property owners:**²

July 13, 1665

Original land grant to Thomas Taylor; 700 acres known as “Handsell,” located in the “Indiantown” adjacent to Chicone Creek.³

May 30, 1693, Deed 5 Old 32

Thomas and Francis Taylor to Christopher Nutter of Somerset County; Handsell is noted as comprising 700 acres and being located on the east side of Taylor’s Creek and Nanticoke River.

February 2, 1705/6, Deed 6 Old 149

Christopher and Margaret Nutter, Charles and Sarah Nutter, and Mathew s Anne Nutter to their brother William Nutter; the 700 acre parcel had been previously left by Christopher Nutter, Sr., to his sons.

July 24, 1720, Deed 2 Old 45

William Nutter and Robert Jones, his attorney, to John Rider of Dorchester County; in exchange for a tract of 361 acres called “Dublin” and £20, they convey Handsell and its 700 acres on Taylor’s Creek (Chicone Creek) and Nanticoke River to Rider.

1723

The Maryland colony passed a law protecting the Indians from English encroachment on the Choptank and Nanticoke-Chicone reservation lands.⁴ This law referenced a 1698 act that created the reservation. The English never left after 1698, some built homes on the reservation and conflicts continued between the settlers and the native population until

2010, conducted by Michael Worthington of the Oxford Tree-Ring Laboratory, Rising Sun, Maryland. Twelve samples were taken on September 7, 2010 and all tested to 1837.

² The abstracts of the original deeds are located in the state deed records held at the Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, Maryland (hereafter **MSA**).

³ Dorchester County Land Grants, MSA.

⁴ Maryland Archives, Laws of 1723, Chapter 18

the reservation was disestablished, and the Native Americans presumably ejected, in 1768.

May 11, 1769, Deed 23 Old 247

By an "indenture tripartite," Henry and Ann Steele receive part of Handsell, containing about 484 acres bordered by the Chicone Creek and Nanticoke River, while John and Dorothy Henry receive another part of the tract. This agreement returned lands to the heirs of the previous owner, John Rider, that were taken ca. 1723 when Maryland established a Chicone reservation, which was dissolved in 1768. Ownership of Handsell was divided between Rider's daughter Dorothy Henry and his granddaughter Ann Billings Steele, although others made claims that did not prevail. Perhaps not unrelated, Henry Steele, Ann's husband was a delegate to the Maryland Assembly in 1769 when the claims were lodged

1782-1788

Henry Steele died in 1782. A 1783 tax assessment for Ann Steele lists Handsell's 484 acres as among her many properties. Ann Steele died in 1788, leaving two living heirs, sons James and Isaac. There are no extant wills for Henry or Ann Steele since such records for Dorchester County prior to 1849 were destroyed in a courthouse fire that year.

March 22, 1792, Deed 4 HD 9

James Steele, acting as executor to his mother's estate, grants "Handsell" on east side of Nanticoke River at Taylor's Creek (Chicone Creek), containing 484 acres, to Isaac Steele, his brother.

November 7, 1806

Isaac Steele dies intestate at age thirty-seven.⁵ There is no record that he married or had children. He is buried in Christ Church in Cambridge, Maryland, where his lone tomb says "from a loving brother." While no will exists, James Steele was his only living heir and, in December 1806, was appointed executor of his brother Isaac's estate.⁶

September 21, 1816

James Steele dies and leaves his son Isaac Nevett Steele "all my part of the tract of land called Handsell lying and being in Dorchester County" (484 acres).⁷

July 17, 1837, Deed 17 ER 29

Isaac Nevett Steele of Baltimore County conveyed the 484 acres to John Shehee.

March 30, 1849, Deed 4 WJ 564

Ezekiah Hooper, trustee for the estate of John Shehee, conveyed the 484 acres to Jacob C. Wilson.

⁵ "Died, Isaac Steele, of Dorchester County, Friday 7, inst.," *Republican Star* 11 Nov. 1806.

⁶ *Republican Star, or, Eastern Shore General Advertiser* 11 Dec. 1806.

⁷ Will of James Steele, Dorchester County wills, Liber 11, 120-24. This will no longer exists in public record, but a copy is present in the collection of Nanticoke Historic Preservation Alliance, Inc. It was discovered among the letters of Catherine Steele Ray, a daughter of James Steele.

November 8, 1859, Deed 4 FJH 534

Ambrose A. and Sophia L. Wilson to John Thompson. Jacob C. Wilson had previously left "Hansel" in the Nanticoke "Indian Town" to his son Ambrose (484 acres).

December 30, 1862

John Thompson wills his real and personal estate to his son Samuel E. Thompson and daughter Matilda H. Thompson.⁸

October 27, 1869, Deed 7 FJH 488

Matilda H. Thompson conveys the 484 acres of "Hansel" to her brother Samuel E. Thompson.

September 14, 1892, Deed 16 CL 704

Samuel E. Thompson to Thomas J. Webb and John W. T. Webb, partners trading as Webb and Brothers (484 acres). It is mentioned in the deed that this transaction was as payment for a debt.⁹

August 8, 1921

John W. T. Webb (Sr.) wills the tract to John W. T. Webb (Jr.) and Dorco Farms, Inc.¹⁰

January 9, 1976, Liber 193 folio 39

John W. T. Webb et al and Dorco Farms, Inc. each receive a 1/6 interest in the "Webb Farm," which included "Hansel."

March 20, 1984, Liber 230 folio 565

Clara L. Webb leaves a 1/3 interest in "Webb Farm," which included "Hansel" to Mary Virginia Webb France and Alan Leonard Webb, tenants in common.

March 15, 1993, Liber 288 folio 146

John W.T. Webb leaves Margaret D.J. Webb and the Manufacturers' & Traders Trust Co. ½ interest in the Webb Farm.

March 1, 2004, Liber 0567 folio 0407

Margaret D. J. Webb and Manufacturers & Traders Trust Co., Nicholas Farms, Inc. (survivor under merger with Dorco Farms, Inc.), Mary Virginia Webb France. and Alan Leonard Webb to David S. and Carol R. Lewis, the brick house called "Handsell", including two acres and a right-of-way to the Chicone Creek subdivided from the Webb Farm.

⁸ Will of John Thompson, Dorchester County wills, Liber E to L #1, 347-49.

⁹ Family oral history says that Thompson lost the farm in a card game. The next year, Thompson is listed as postmaster of Vienna and may have continued to live at Handsell as a tenant farmer.

¹⁰ Will of John W. T. Webb (Sr.), Dorchester County wills, Liber RPS 2, folio 446.

October 8, 2009

David S. and Carol R. Lewis convey the “old brick house at Chicone” known as “Handsell,” to the Nanticoke Historic Preservation Alliance, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to its restoration and preservation.

4. Original and subsequent occupants:

1665—Thomas Taylor received the original land grant. No records exist showing that he or his family ever resided at the tract; however, he did operate a trading post on the property.

1720—According to the testimony given by a Nanticoke Indian before the Maryland Colonial Assembly, John Rider had built a frame home in the Indiantown, and reports were made of “others continuing to build houses” on Indian land at Chicone.¹¹

1756-82—Englishman Henry Steele married Ann Billings, the granddaughter of John Rider, in 1756. According to local Dorchester County oral history, “He purchased an estate adjoining Weston near Vienna on the Nanticoke and built one of the largest and most pretentious houses in Dorchester County, where he resided at the time of his death in 1782.”¹² Documents indicate that Henry Steele owned and may have lived in the small gambrel-roof house on the sixty-acre portion of Weston, known locally as the “Lewis Wharf House,” but this dwelling could in no way be construed as “large or pretentious.” It seems likely that when the Steeles acquired the 484-acre part of Handsell in 1769 that they most likely began construction of a brick house on the property. The location of this house had never been conclusively determined; however, archaeology conducted in 2008 has revealed a much larger foundation under Handsell. It is probable that the Steeles’ house stood on the site of the extant building by that name.

1776—According to the Maryland census taken in 1776, Henry Steele lived in the Nanticoke District of Dorchester County with his family and ninety-one slaves, numbers which indicate a very large plantation for the time and place.¹³

1779-81—English privateers systematically targeted the homes of colonel patriots in order to burn and loot plantations and patriot ships. There was such activity on the Nanticoke River. Weston, the home of patriot and Revolutionary colonel John Henry located on the banks of the Nanticoke below Vienna, was devastated on September 29, 1780.¹⁴ On August 27, 1781, “two British barges pushed up the Nanticoke to Vienna, plundered the habitants of the town and captured 2-3 fully laden vessels lying in the river up there. One of the barges proceeded up beyond the town [location of Handsell] and

¹¹ Frank W. Porter III, “A Century of Accommodation: The Nanticoke Indians in Colonial Maryland,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 100 (Summer 2005): 153.

¹² Elias Jones, *Revised History of Dorchester County, Maryland* (Baltimore: The Read-Taylor Press, 1925), 458-467.

¹³ Maryland census schedules for the Vienna District, Dorchester County, 1776.

¹⁴ David G. Shomette, *Pirates on the Chesapeake* (Centerville, MD: Tidewaters Publishers, 1985), 263.

captured two more vessels”.¹⁵ Apparently during one of these raids, Handsell was also involved as it is reported that a slave was stolen from “neighbor Henry Steele”.¹⁶ In addition, Steele and Henry were related by marriage, and were business partners and good friends. Steele’s involvement in the Maryland’s colonial government and his merchant activities, and his close relations with Colonel John Henry all would have provided the British with reasons to make Steele’s house a target.

1783—The 1783 tax assessment for Ann Steele lists among her many properties in Dorchester County, “Hancel containing one framed dwelling house, five logged dwelling houses, two barns and one orchard”.¹⁷ This reference to a frame house seems to conflict with other evidence that the house was brick, and could possibly be an error in recording the house as frame at the time of the assessment or, alternately, evidence that the brick house was already destroyed and she was living in a frame dwelling on the property. None of Ann’s many other properties list a brick house. The brick Lewis Wharf House (as it is known in more recent writings) on a sixty-acre portion of Weston, which Ann Steele also owned, is listed as one “old house” and also not specified as brick in the assessment record. The “five logged dwelling houses” listed in the tax assessment indicate housing for a large number of slaves, and two barns and an orchard are additional indications of a thriving plantation.

1790-1806—Ann and Henry Steele’s oldest son, James Steele, served as executor of their estates, and Handsell was left to a younger son, Isaac Steele. He was listed in the U.S. census of 1800 as living in the Vienna District without any family and with fourteen slaves.¹⁸ It is probable by this time that Handsell was no longer the large brick house that his family formerly knew, because, in 1803, Isaac Steele purchased 160 acres known as “Hambrooks” from William Vans Murray, just west of Cambridge, where his only surviving brother James had already settled at “The Point.” Isaac began construction of a large five-bay brick home at Hambrooks, but it is unknown whether the house was ever completed or lived in by him. He died November 7, 1806, two days after his thirty-seventh birthday.

1803-07—James Steele signed agreements with Levin Simmons to be his overseer on the “plantation in the Indian Town.” One agreement, dated January 25, 1806, stated: “Levin Simmons agrees to continue in the employment of James Steele as Overseer during the present year at his plantation in the Indian Town where he [Levin] now lives.”¹⁹ In 1807, James Steele, as the only living heir to the entire Steele family estate, inherited properties in Dorchester County totaling about 8,000 acres, including Handsell. As James Steele

¹⁵ Ibid, 274.

¹⁶ Jones, 458-67.

¹⁷ Tax assessment for Ann Steele, Vienna, Maryland, 1783.

¹⁸ Vienna District, Dorchester County schedules for the U.S. census of 1800.

¹⁹ John C. Henry to Catherine Steele, 25 Jun. 1817, Steele Family Papers, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland (hereafter **MHS**).

lived at The Point, Handsell would have been managed for income only with the house available for other family members or an overseer.

1810—Levin Simmons, the overseer, is listed as living in the Vienna District with family and twenty-seven slaves. John C. Henry, James Steele's son-in-law, is also living in the Indiantown area with two other females and fifty-two slaves.²⁰

1808-17—In 1816, James Steele died and bequeathed Handsell to his son Isaac Nevett Steele who was only seven years old at the time.²¹ Nevett, as he was called by the family, was living and attending school in Annapolis at the winter home of his mother, Mary Nevett Steele. Nevett's sister and brother-in-law, Mary Steele and John C. Henry were living in the Vienna area during this time because, on August 12, 1816, Mary gave birth to her first son, Francis J. Henry who was "born at Hansel."²² That they were living in the Vienna area is confirmed by a letter that John C. Henry wrote to Catherine Steele in 1817 to thank her for agreeing to sell him Hambrooks. James had previously bequeathed Hambrooks to his daughter, Catherine, born in 1801. This letter, the earliest extant one known to be written from Vienna, indicates that they were moving to much more adequate accommodations, for which he was grateful:

My dear Miss Steele,

I was much grateful in hearing through your mother that you were willing to sell me Hambrooks. It will be the means of ridding me of a great deal of trouble & furnishing a comfortable residence in a much shorter time than I could have procured in any other way. The manner in which your Mother proposed selling will suit me better than the one intended & I shall be ready to pay to your order one half the purchase money as soon as you wish—The other half I shall haste to beg as credit for as [?] more convenient to debtor—

I will give you my Bond & such security as you may choose in this county—The house and enclosures require some repairs or I could have paid more, but you shall receive this interest punctually until paid which I presume will answer your purposes and will for the present—Your Mother will petition the chancellor for the sale of H—as soon as convenient I suppose—Mrs. Henry is to ride out this morning to make arrangements for us to move this week—I [?] you [hail?] with much pleasure the near prospect of being in a house that I can call my own, much more so as it has been through the instrumentality of a young Lady I so much respect and admire as Miss Catherine Steele—[I] hope in a few years to make it a handsome place—

Jno C. Henry June 25th, 1817²³

²⁰ Vienna District, Dorchester County schedules for the U.S. census of 1810.

²¹ Will of James Steele, 1816, collection of the Nanticoke Historic Preservation Alliance, Inc., Cambridge, Maryland (hereafter **NHPA**).

²² Obituary of Francis J. Henry, as transcribed in Jones, 338.

²³ Letters of Catherine Steele Ray, Inventory # 43L, NHPA.

Although John C. Henry and his wife Mary Steele were most likely living on the property called “Handsell” from the time of their marriage in 1808 until 1817, the year in which they purchased Hambrooks from Mary’s sister, they were not residing in the house now called “Handsell.” As a young man, Nevett Steele continued to own the property and would have reaped financial benefits of the farm production, but he spent his entire life and career in Annapolis and Baltimore.²⁴

1837—Handsell was sold to John Shehee of Dorchester County, who immediately built a house on the ruins, and incorporating standing walls, of a large eighteenth-century dwelling—the outcome is the house now known as “Handsell.”²⁵ The 1840 census indicates he lived in the Vienna District with seven others, three males aged between five and thirty and four females aged between ten and thirty. Three free black males were also listed as part of his household.²⁶

1849—Handsell was sold to Jacob C. Wilson. Wilson apparently lived near Preston, in Caroline County all his life. He is listed as owning four slaves in the 1850 slave census. It seems as though the purchase of Handsell was only speculative and that Wilson never lived there.

1859-62—Handsell was sold to John Thompson who is listed in the 1860 census as aged seventy-three, a farmer, with real estate valued at \$7,000 and personal property at \$10,000.²⁷ He was living with wife Mary and daughter Matilda, aged twenty-one. His son Samuel was listed in 1850 census as residing with the Thompson family, but was married to Emily Webb in 1859 and seems not to have been resident there in 1860.²⁸ The 1860 slave schedule listed John Thompson as the owner of ten slaves.²⁹

1862-92—John Thompson died and willed Handsell to his son Samuel, who occupied the house at least through 1892.

1892—Family lore indicates that Samuel Thompson lost Handsell in a “card game” to J. W. T. Webb. A deed from this transaction indicates he lived at Handsell at the time.³⁰

1916—The brick house at Handsell was rented by Harry and Della Bradshaw Hughes. Della gave birth to her first child, Blanche, on February 9, 1916 while living at Handsell.

²⁴ Brantz Mayer, *Baltimore: Past and Present* (Baltimore: Richardson & Bennett, 1871), 481-84.

²⁵ The dendrochronology study at Handsell occurred in 2010, conducted by Michael Worthington of the Oxford Tree-Ring Laboratory, Rising Sun, Maryland. Twelve samples were taken on September 7, 2010 and all tested to 1837.

²⁶ Vienna District, Dorchester County schedules for the U.S. census of 1840.

²⁷ Vienna District, Dorchester County schedules for the U.S. census of 1860.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Vienna District, Dorchester County slave schedules for the U.S. census of 1860.

³⁰ Interview with Michael Nicholas by Margaret Ingersoll, 2009, NHPA.

The Hughes family left Handsell shortly after her birth. The 1920 census lists the Hugheses as renting the house with Milliard Lewis, age eighteen, living with them as a “hired boy”.³¹

1920s—Glen and Mary Wilson lived “in the old brick house at Chicone,” and later told the story of the barn burning one night.³²

1930s—In about 1930, the windows and doors in the main part of the brick house were boarded up and a corrugated tin roof was added to protect it from the elements; no one lived in Handsell again.³³ A white frame farmhouse, built around 1900 directly in front of Handsell, was occupied by the Pinder and then Nicholas families in the twentieth century until it was demolished in the 1970s.³⁴

5. Original plans and construction:

The most definitive statement that can be made about Handsell is that it incorporates the remnants of a large eighteenth-century house into a more modest one in the nineteenth century constructed over and among the ruins of the former. The front and side brick walls up to the present roofline are all that remain of the original house on the exterior. On the interior, two first floor fireplaces remain along with one badly deteriorated kitchen fireplace and bake oven in the raised cellar.

Although no original plans exist, and there is no record of an architect, the original Handsell is believed to have been a five-bay, two-story Georgian house on a raised basement and with an attic. Ann Billings Steele would have had knowledge of her Aunt Sarah Darnall’s grand home at Poplar Hill at His Lordship’s Kindness, which was built about 1770. Her husband, Henry Steele who was fully engaged in the Maryland Assembly in 1763, 1769, and 1770 in Annapolis would have also been aware of the more formal architectural styles being built at the time in the colonial capital.³⁵ Steele owned dozens of slaves, certainly enough to assist in the construction a large brick house that he could have designed himself.

The most obvious evidence of a larger home is the bricked-up 7'-0"-high window in the west façade of the house. This indicates that the first-floor ceilings were once higher than at present. As further evidence, the firebox in the second floor is raised 30" above the floor and at one time would likely have been at floor level. Recently excavated

³¹ Vienna District, Dorchester County schedules for the U.S. census of 1820.

³² Hal Roth, *Conversations in a Country Store* (Vienna, MD: Nanticoke Books, 1995), 51. Telephone conversation by the preparer of this report with Hal Roth on 31 Jul. 2006 and subsequent call to Betty Wilson the same day confirmed that the Wilsons had lived at Handsell.

³³ Interview with Margaret Webb by Margaret Ingersoll and David Lewis, ca. 2007-09, NHPA.

³⁴ Interview with Russell Baker and Nathan Foundation, 2007, and with Michael Nicholas, 2009, both by Margaret Ingersoll.

³⁵ List of Maryland assembly delegates, MSA.

foundations to the rear of the house reveal a footprint that was much larger than the present one.³⁶

From these excavations, it can be suggested that the original house had a center hall with four flanking rooms, each with a fireplace. The original foundation dimensions would have been approximately 32' x 40'. The second floor was most likely a duplicate of the first floor. There was an interior kitchen and bake oven in the raised cellar and investigations suggest the house had at least four chimneys.

The front façade has a protruding feature which most likely was capped with a pediment advancing forward of either an gable or hip main roof, such as the one seen on the Lewis Wharf House south of Vienna (today know as “Weston Farms”). Marks in the brick work by the front door indicate that there were two “facing benches” on the front porch anchored into the brick facade.

6. Alterations and additions:

Given the pieces of evidence, it is reasonable to narrow the time period of the collapse of the original Handsell to the years between 1779-83 if it was destroyed by the British. The most curious fact here is the listing of Handsell as a frame house in the 1783 tax assessment of Ann Steele. This gives the most credence to the theory that the brick house had been destroyed by this time. If the assessor made an error, then the destruction could have occurred anytime before 1803. Whether earlier or later, the house likely burned. The rebuild could have occurred to provide a place of residence for the family, or a temporary place for the single Isaac to stay while he was building his new house at Hambrooks in 1803-06. The fact that Isaac purchased Hambrooks at all is a further indication that Handsell had been destroyed by 1803, otherwise there would have been no point to leaving a grand family house. The present house was constructed on and out of the ruins of the earlier one in 1837.

The front wall, up to a point just below the first floor ceiling, and the front halves of the two side walls survived the fire or other destruction in well enough shape to be reused when the house was reconstructed. The owners simply squared off the rear walls to about twenty feet and created corners to tie in a new back wall. The brickwork of the rear wall is much less refined than the original, and visual evidence suggests that many of the old bricks were reused. The mortar does not match the original and the wall is only 14"-thick instead of the original 20". On these walls a gable roof was added, making the house one-and-one-half stories over a raised cellar. Even some of the original support walls in the cellar were left as room dividers and the cooking fireplace and bake oven were placed back into service for the rebuilt house. All the present interior woodwork seems to date from the period of the rebuild, with the exception of two parlor closets which were added just a short time after.³⁷

³⁶ Excavations are ongoing at Handsell. They began in 2008 under the supervision of archaeologists Virginia Busby, followed by Edward Otter.

³⁷ Comments by Michael Bourne, an architectural historian, after several visits to Handsell, 2006-07.

Sometime early in the twentieth century, a frame “farm mangers” office was added to the east end of Handsell, which was used for storage with hogs housed in the raised cellar. The frame addition was in ruinous condition by 2005, and collapsed in 2008 and was removed.

B. Historical Context

Early Dwellings on the Eastern Shore

Handsell’s site had long been a permanent Native American settlement³⁸ The first dwellings on the land prior to 1665 were “longhouses” of Native Americans. The English were frequently drawn to the land occupied by native groups, not just because these often were the most desirable locations for dwelling, but because of growing trade that was established between the Europeans and the Native Americans.

These first frame houses built by the English in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries were designs based on simple English cottages.³⁹ Such houses generally contained one-and-one-half stories, were clapboarded or sheathed with weather boards, either earth-fast or raised on brick piers or underpinnings sometimes with a cellar below. The interior plan was general a single “hall” with a hall chamber or small garret above. A larger version included a hall and parlor, with a hall chamber and a parlor chamber above. There were often one or two exterior brick chimneys on the end walls. The second floor was entered either by a ladder or a small winder stair. If it existed at all, the interior woodwork was simple, only occasionally having raised paneling. This description is applicable to many frame houses still surviving on the Eastern Shore and indeed much of the Chesapeake region today.⁴⁰

While the wealthier landowners could eventually afford to build houses of brick and increasingly incorporated a central passage between the hall and parlor. As the eighteenth century progressed, more and more interior woodwork included raised panels, crown molding, and chair rails. In time, high-style Georgian detailing appeared in the houses constructed by the most affluent Americans. These were often two full stories, arranged in five vertical bays, and double pile with four major rooms or spaces per floor in addition to the central passage. The ornamentation of the interior woodwork was as ornate as the owner’s desires and pocketbook would allow.

Handsell, Its Owners, and Its Residents

It is likely that the original house called Handsell was a large and imposing example of Georgian architecture, as suggested by recent archaeology on the site and by the original walls incorporated into the second house. There exists, as an example, a similar mid-eighteenth-century brick house below Vienna, in historic deeds known as “Lewis

³⁸ Virginia Busby, “Interim Report on Archaeological Research at Nicholas Farms,” August 1996, manuscript on file at the Maryland Historical Trust, Crownsville, Maryland.

³⁹ H. Chandlee Forman, *Early Manor and Plantation Houses of Maryland: An Architectural and Historical Compendium, 1634-1800*, 2nd ed., rev. (1934) (Baltimore, MD: Bodine and Associates, Inc., 1982).

⁴⁰ Christopher Weeks, ed, *Between the Nanticoke and the Choptank: An Architectural History of Dorchester County* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press and the Maryland Historic Trust, 1984), plates D-15, D- 29, D-41, D-44 and D-99.

Regulation,” known as Weston Farms today. While this house is only three bays wide, it exhibits many characteristics of the Handsell façade including a protruding central pavilion, as at Handsell, topped by a pediment. It is believed that this house was built by a relation of Ann Billings Steele. After a major fire and structural collapse, the owners of Handsell reused portions of the earlier house and constructed a more modest dwelling with a hall and parlor situated on either side of a central passage, a plane widespread in the Chesapeake.

Over time, the acreage comprising Handsell has been connected with several prominent families. Its Anglo history begins with Thomas Taylor’s trading post, which survived a 100-year period during which the area returned to the control of the Chicone. In the eighteenth century, more intensive settlement of the Maryland colony resulted in the return of the English to the area and the increased marginalization of the Native Americans.

Thomas Taylor, the local sheriff and a high-ranking military officer who served as an official interpreter to the natives at Chicone (Chicacone) was the first owner of the property, which he named Handsell. As was the case with early English settlers and their land grants, the trading of goods with the natives was often a critical part of their economic survival.⁴¹ Taylor had set up a routine of trading with the natives to the extent that he named this land grant Handsell, which is derived from the English “handsel.” The word has a number of related meanings including: “The first money or barter taken in, as by a new business or on the opening day of business, especially when considered a token of good luck,” and “a foretaste of what is to come.”⁴²

As the next owner of Handsell, Christopher Nutter worked with Taylor and maintained the relationship with the Chicone natives. In colonial Maryland, such trading relationships brought a certain benefit to both parties. Taylor and Nutter’s trading post at Indiantown used the arrangement to protecting their own economic interests, but also, for a time, protected the Chicone from full encroachment by other Englishman. However, when Nutter died and his heirs sold the property to John Rider, this relatively amicable relationship between the English and the Chicone at Indiantown began to deteriorate.

Reports of conflicts arose between the Indians and the English, when the land was newly owned and apparently occupied by John Rider. Frank Porter observes that the first reference to an English house at Handsell occurred in 1723 in reference to these conflicts:

In 1723, Captain John Rider and Isaac Nicolls claimed that they had gained legal possession of a large tract of land on an Indian reservation because they had found the reservation deserted except for one Indian, William Ashquash, the son of the late Nanticoke Emperor. Testimony established that Rider had physically ousted Asquash and set his cabin on fire, building in turn a clapboard house of his own. The Indians, returning in the fall of the year, took up residence and burned the house erected by Rider. They testified that Rider had indeed found

⁴¹ Helen C. Rountree and Thomas E. Davidson, *Eastern Shore Indians of Maryland and Virginia* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 108.

⁴² Definition of “handsel,” accessed online, 10 Nov. 2009, www.dictionary.com.

their towns uninhabited because most of the Indians had 'gone out to their hunting quarters according to their usual practice.' The Maryland authorities ruled that Rider and Nicholls were trespassers and had no right or title to the land. In a later testimony, the Indians claimed that the English were continuing to build homes on their land.⁴³

Henry Steele, an English gentleman and merchant, first settled in Oxford, Maryland. By 1749 Henry Steele and Colonel John Henry of Vienna, Dorchester County were business partners. Steele eventually married Ann Billings, the daughter of James Billings, a merchant from Oxford and landowner near Vienna, and Sarah Rider Billings, a daughter of John Rider and also from Vienna. Henry married Dorothy, another daughter of the Riders, making Henry and Steele related by marriage. Henry and Steele purchased lots jointly in Cambridge and Vienna.

After his marriage to Ann Billings on October 28, 1756, Steele moved to Dorchester County near Vienna. They most likely lived in the old brick house on Lewis Wharf Road in the first years of their marriage, which was owned by Ann's parents. Steele served as a delegate from Dorchester County in the Maryland Assembly and House of Burgesses in 1763, 1769, and 1770. It is most likely that they began building a large brick house at Handsell about the time of the May 11, 1769 "Indenture Tripartite" which returned the Indiantown lands to the heirs of John Rider, including Ann Billings Steele. Henry Steele purchased land from the other heirs and became the sole owner of the tract, which originally extended from the Chicacone Creek to the junction of the northwest fork of the Nanticoke near Walnut Landing.⁴⁴ By the time of Maryland's census in 1776, Steele and his entire family and a large holding of slaves were living in the Vienna district of Dorchester County, almost certainly at Handsell.

During the American Revolution, the Nanticoke River was actively patrolled by the British. At least twice during 1779-81, the town of Vienna and several homes of local patriots were fired on by British ships. It is recorded that Weston, the house of Colonel John Henry—an officer and known patriot—was looted and burned at this time. It is entirely plausible that the original brick house at Handsell was also burned during these raids.

A May 1, 1782 letter from James Muir, the uncle of Ann Billings Steele, records Henry Steele's death:

The Fall and spring has been very sickly and that mortal numbers have dropt off the stage among others is my Friend Henry Steele, Esqr. who departed this life on Tuesday the fifth of February at forty seven minutes after twelve o'clock, it being the thirteen[th] day of his illness as I was with him during the whole time of his illness. I never saw any person bare it with so much fortitude, perfectly [resigned] to his fate and said that the will of Heaven must be complied with and Natures debt paid. Those that were spectators to his death have a most [?] of

⁴³ Frank W. Porter III, "A Century of Accommodation: The Nanticoke Indians in Colonial Maryland," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 100 (Summer 2005): 153, footnote 42.

⁴⁴ Jones, 460.

example left them. For my own part I never was a spectator to so mournful a scene before.⁴⁵

The account of Ann Steele's death on April 29, 1788 is also recorded in a letter by James Muir, writing from Vienna:

it is probable you may hear of the death of poor Mrs. Steele, she was taken in the evening walking in the garden, with an ague, soon became deprived of her senses, and continued so until she died, Jamey Steele had only left her two days before, with his two younger Brothers for Prince Town, she was then in as good health as common...⁴⁶

Isaac Steele inherited Handsell after his mother's death. He never married and served as a delegate to the general assembly of Maryland in 1797-98 and, again, in 1800-02.⁴⁷ In 1803, he purchased the property known as Hambrooks, just west of Cambridge and began construction on a large five-bay house. James Steele, his brother, served in the general assembly in 1784, 1788, and 1796. James's primary residence continued to be The Point in Cambridge and he maintained another in Annapolis for "the season" when the legislature was in session.⁴⁸ When his brother Isaac died, James was the sole benefactor of the immense Steele estate, totaling about 8,000 acres, spread among numerous plantations, and about ninety slaves.

At the 1816 death of James Steele, Handsell was left to his ninth son, Isaac Nevett Steele, known as "Nevett." Nevett Steele lived all his life in Annapolis and Baltimore. He was educated at St. John's Academy in Annapolis and, later, at Washington (Trinity after 1845) College in Hartford, Connecticut. He received his law training from David Hoffman, a law professor at the University of Maryland. Nevett Steele went on to become one of the most prominent lawyers of his day in the Baltimore area.

By 1819, Ann Ogle Buchanan Steel, wife of John Nevett Steele another of James and Mary Steele's sons, was writing letter from "the Indiantown." They had their own house on the northern part of the Handsell tract, about a mile north and across the road from Handsell. In a letter dated 1823, Ann writes to Catherine, her sister-in-law, stating: "if you were only at Hansel, all would be right." Several other letters addressed from the "Indiantown" during this time talk of the gardens, crops, visitors, and the travels to and from Cambridge.⁴⁹ Ann Ogle Buchanan and John Steele continued to live at their Indiantown dwelling. Nevett Steele sold Handsell on July 17, 1837 when he was twenty eight.

⁴⁵ James Muir letter of 1 May 1782, James and John Muir Letters, 1781-1789, MHS.

⁴⁶ James Muir letter of 12 May 1788, James and John Muir Letters, 1781-1789, MHS. James Muir May 12, 1788. In the letter, Muir refers to James Steele, the second son of Ann and Henry Steele. Peter and John were the "two younger brothers."

⁴⁷ List of Maryland assembly delegates, MSA.

⁴⁸ This dwelling survives as "Ogle House" at the U.S. Naval Academy.

⁴⁹ Letters of Catherine Steele Ray, Inventory # 43L, NHPA.

Little is known at the time about John Shehee, who constructed the present house, Jacob Wilson, and John Thompson, the owners of Handsell between 1837 and 1962. They are all recorded as farmers and, until after the Civil War, slave owners. While it seems that Jacob C. Wilson never occupied the brick house at Handsell, the John and Samuel Thompson families did live there. Indeed, John Thompson's family may have occupied the house during the Wilson ownership. Samuel Thompson is listed as the postmaster for Vienna in 1895.⁵⁰ A photograph from the late-1800s and one from the early 1900s show Handsell as the building exists today, except that the brickwork is limed. The photos show a barn to the rear of the brick house and a privy to one side.⁵¹

In the front of Handsell, near the creek, stood a small frame house, now demolished, that was occupied for many years by an African-American family. From descriptions given by living descendants of this family, this house appears to have been a very old frame cottage typical of the Eastern Shore, and in all likelihood had been part of the Handsell plantation complex.⁵² This building and all others in the Indiantown besides Handsell have been demolished.

The Webb family has owned the Handsell house since 1892 and it was J. W. T. Webb, Jr. who, in the 1930s, boarded over Handsell's windows and doors and put on the tin roof. Without this protection, Handsell would have likely deteriorated and been demolished as was the fate of many other historic buildings nearby along Indiantown Road.

In 1932, H. Chandlee Forman, an architectural historian from Talbot County, Maryland, visited the brick house on Indiantown Road for the first time. He photographed the exterior, but was unable to gain access to the interior. Forman dated the house to the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In a 1934 book, Forman references the Old House near Vienna, with its 6'-6" molded brick water table.⁵³ H. Chandlee Forman surveyed the house again in 1978, then known as the Goldsborough or Webb house. He was able to access the interior, which was empty and reportedly filled with pigeons, and made a conjectural sketch of the cellar oven.⁵⁴ The "Webb House" was listed in the Maryland Inventory of Historic Places in 1984 when it was included in the volume entitled *Between*

⁵⁰ Calvin W. Mowbray, *The Dorchester County Fact Book: An Historical Survey of Churches, Mills, Post Offices, Transportation, and Revolutionary War Participants* (1980).

⁵¹ Photos in the collection of the NHPA.

⁵² Interview with Shirley Jackson by Margaret Ingersoll, 2008, NHPA. Shirley Jackson lived in the frame cottage near the Chicone Creek, just to the south of Handsell. Ongoing research is exploring the possibility that African Americans living in the area are descendents of the slaves at Handsell.

⁵³ See H. Chandlee Forman, *Early Manor and Plantation Houses of Maryland: An Architectural and Historical Compendium, 1634-1800*, 2nd ed., rev. (1934) (Baltimore, MD: Bodine and Associates, Inc., 1982).

⁵⁴ H. Chandlee Forman, *Early Buildings and Historic Artifacts in Tidewater Maryland, 1: The Eastern Shore* (Centerville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1989), 308-10.

the Nanticoke and the Choptank. It was still boarded up and slowly being engulfed with vines.⁵⁵

In 2003, the Webb family sold the house in 2003 to David and Carol Lewis in order to preserve it. The Lewis' removed 3500 pounds of debris from the house's interior and removed the vines that covered most of the exterior. The original woodwork was found to be intact, with no evidence of repainting, and there did not appear to be any alterations to the floor plan or the installation of any modern utilities. The house had miraculously survived in a pristine state of preservation as rebuilt two-hundred years earlier.

In December 2005, the Lewises and others established the Nanticoke Historic Preservation Alliance, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of the house. Due to the efforts of this organization, Handsell was listed in National Register of Historic Places in March 2008. The organization received grant money from the Maryland Historical Trust to help with one-half of the cost of the HABS report, with the remainder coming from fund-raising activities. In April 2009, Handsell was placed on "Maryland's Most Endangered" list by Preservation Maryland and Maryland Life Magazine.⁵⁶ The NHPA's fundraising efforts continue to support the restoration of Handsell as well as educational programs of the organization, which are solely dedicated to teaching future generations of the three hundred year history of Handsell and the Chicone Indiantown.

PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General statement:

1. **Overall description:** Handsell is a one-and-one-half story brick house over a raised basement. The façade has a formal appearance with Georgian features, giving a grand impression to otherwise modest proportions. The front and side walls are 20" thick and consist of five layers of brick. The principal elevation, laid in Flemish bond, is arranged in five bays with the center door and transom and two of four flanking windows positioned in a pavilion set 4" forward of the rest of the façade. There is a molded water table between the basement and first floor. Basement windows are located directly beneath the openings of the first floor, including the door; two of these were later closed. A single dormer window centered above the door is the only window on this side of the corrugated tin gable roof. Each of the gable ends has two small windows flanking a chimney.

The rear of the building is arranged in five bays on the first story with three bays on the basement level below. As on the principal façade, there is another single dormer penetrating the roof. The first-floor wall is in a single plane laid in common bond without a water table. The brickwork at the rear is less refined in craftsmanship than the

⁵⁵ Christopher Weeks, ed, *Between the Nanticoke and the Choptank: An Architectural History of Dorchester County* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press and the Maryland Historic Trust, 1984), 14.

⁵⁶ For more information on the Nanticoke Historic Preservation Alliance, Inc., see: www.restorehandsell.org.

other walls, and measures only 14" in thickness. The brickwork on this façade does not visually correspond with the brickwork on the sides and front facades.

There is much evidence to support the theory that the present house was built upon the surviving brick walls of a previous structure. Archaeological study on site in 2008 has revealed the foundation of the original house as larger, extending beyond the rear of the present structure, in line with the side walls. A fire is the most logical explanation of such devastation to this dwelling house, but whatever the means of demolition, the front and side walls of the original house remained standing to the height of the top of the first-story windows.

At the time of rebuilding, a new rear wall of the house was built, most likely with bricks from the original house, but by a craftsman of lesser skill than the original. The front windows were shortened with crudely laid jack arches and reduced in size on their sides at a width of ½ of brick. The interior woodwork corresponds with the smaller openings. The first floor ceiling was lowered, marooning the fireplace in the original west chamber 30" above the second-story floor. The east chimney was totally rebuilt, and the west partially rebuilt. There is a completely bricked-in outline of a 7'-high window which once existed in the west façade. The outline clearly shows the size and shape of the sill and the jack arch that once capped this window, which extends above the second-story floor.

An interesting feature in the front façade is two bricked up holes on either side of the central entrance door, within the area of the protruding "pavilion." These are at a height and spacing that suggest matching "facing benches" were once located on the front porch. Historic photos of Handsell from the late-nineteenth through the early-twentieth century indicate that the brick house was treated with a lime-washed finish, probably to conceal the difference in brickwork between the front/side facades and newer rear façade.

2. **Architectural character:** The interior of this brick house, with its typical floor plan and simplicity of woodwork detail, is similar to other Eastern Shore interiors of the period. The more formal five-bay brick façade with its raised cellar, dating from an earlier period, gives an impression of grandeur not evident in most other one-and-one-half story homes in the area. The building stands alone on the highest part of a 1,400-acre parcel of land, making it appear even more prominent upon approach.

3. **Condition of fabric:**

Exterior: brick—fair, exhibiting some larger fissures, though currently stable; wood trim—poor; the window openings are boarded over with plywood.

Interior: overall—fair to poor; only a few pieces of wood trim missing; the front door exists in pieces and the other doors are all intact; all window sash is missing, although some exists in pieces; there are broken and missing floor boards on the first floor. The basement cooking fireplace and oven are completely collapsed and in need of total reconstruction/restoration.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. **Overall dimensions:** 40'3" x 20'11"
2. **Foundations:** 20" brick foundation, on a concrete footing, 30" thick
3. **Walls:**

Front facade—the brick wall is 20" thick and laid up in Flemish bond with a lime and sand mortar having joints struck in a grapevine style up to the top of the first floor. A water table with ovolo brick molding is positioned 6'-6" above grade. A pavilion encompassing the center three bays protrudes 4" forward of the rest of the façade.

East and West elevations—these walls exhibit the same type of brickwork on the first floor as on the front facade. The brick walls in the gable ends of the second floor are reduced in thickness to 4" and laid-up in a common bond.

Rear elevation—the wall is 14" thick and laid up in a common bond with much cruder mortar work than on the front. The many fissures and large cracks are evidence of structural stress in this façade. Several, later, attempts at repair are indicated by crude patches of cement.

4. **Structural systems:** Load bearing brick exterior walls. There are no interior load-bearing walls, but there is a brick wall in the basement, bisecting the space, which is believed to be a remnant of the structure of the original house.
5. **Openings:**
 - a. **Doors and doorways**—the main door opening, with space for a transom above, is boarded over with plywood. The paneled door exists in pieces having the overall dimensions of 36 ½" x 76 ½". The rear door and transom opening at the center of the first-floor wall is also boarded over; its overall dimensions are 35-½" x 72-¾". All of the door frames are wood. Access to the raised cellar at the center of the rear wall is currently secured with a plywood door.
 - b. **Windows, window frames**—the window openings on first floor, five in front and three in the rear, are covered in plywood. The frames are wood and the nine-over-six sash exist in pieces on-site. There are no windows in the side walls.

On the second floor, two small windows flank each of the chimneys in the gable end (side) walls. They have wood frames and are boarded over. The overall dimensions of the openings are 23 ¾" x 37". Historic images indicate that these windows once held four-over-four sash. There are two dormers, one each on the front and rear slopes of the roof, at center. The window openings are boarded over and contain no sash; historic images depict six-over-six sash in the openings.

In the cellar, there are two bricked up window openings and three that are boarded over on the front facade; no sash remains extant. On the rear there are two window openings boarded over to either side of the door opening with no extant sash.

6. **Roof:** The standing seam metal roof is in fair, but declining condition; there are no shingles beneath the metal.

C. Description of Interior:

1. **Plan:** The first- and second- story plans have a center passage flanked on each side by a single room.

First floor—each of the two rooms on the first floor contains a fireplace set in the gable wall. There is a Federal period mantel on-site, removed from the wall, which is thought to have come from one of these rooms. In the west room, there is a beadboard closet enclosure with shelving on the right of the fireplace. In the east room, a similar closet is positioned to the left of the fireplace. The interior partition walls are painted beadboard, still retaining the original blue paint. The ceiling height is approximately 8'-6".

Second floor—in the west room an original firebox 32" deep in the gable end wall is marooned 30" above the floor. The opening measures 41" x 37" and is plastered with no mantel or surround. A brick chimney extends through the east room, extending approximately 1'-0" from the wall. It has no firebox and is largely plastered over. There are two small closets built into the knee walls in each room, having wide, beadboard doors. The main doors for both rooms are beadboard with the overall dimensions of 30" x 75". The ceiling height is 7'-6".

Ground floor or cellar—the space is entered from a doorway at the center of the rear wall. There is no stair connection to the first floor. The space is bisected by a masonry wall. On the west is a spacious kitchen having remnants of a large cooking fireplace and oven in the west wall. The remainder of the cellar is divided into a pantry with remnants of shelving and a smaller room that may have been the living quarters for the cook.

2. **Flooring:** The first- and second-floors are pine, composed of tongue-and-groove boards 6" to 8" wide. The floor in the cellar appears to be dirt, although excavation may reveal another surface, such as brick.
3. **Wall and ceiling finish:** The interior partition walls are all beadboard and retain a faded blue color thought to be original. The ceilings are plaster on lathe and the exterior walls have a plaster finish applied directly to the brick. Sections of the plaster are missing. The interior beadboard wall separating the east room from the center passage on the second floor was "papered" with newspaper and whitewashed. A fragment of paper reveals a date of 1897.

There stair has a simple banister with one-inch square balusters and a railing, which is only 17" in height. The facing wall contains no rail and is covered with painted beadboard. The individual treads are between 30" and 31" wide; eleven are original.

Two of the treads have been replaced with plywood and a plywood landing, 30" square, replaced three damaged winder steps. The railing enclosing the stair opening in the second-floor passage is 35 ½" high.

4. **Mechanical:** The house was never modernized and contains no plumbing or heating systems. Recently, temporary electrical wiring was installed for lighting and a security system.

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PART IV: PROJECT INFORMATION

The Nanticoke Historic Preservation Alliance, Inc. donated the historical report for Handsell to the Historic American Buildings Survey in 2009, with revisions in 2010.